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### Eros / Kalon / Agathos: Love, the Beautiful and the Good

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LAWRENCE KIMMEL

*Eros / Kalon / Agathos: Love, the Beautiful and the Good*

There is a *Peanuts* cartoon in which Charlie Brown is looking up into the sky and he asks, as Schroeder walks up: “Do you ever see things in the clouds?” Schroeder looks up and says: “Yes. I see the topless towers of Ilium; and there is Horatio at the Gates; and over there, Odysseus leaving behind the shadow of Achilles in Hades.” As Schroeder walks on, Charlie Brown says as an aside, “And I was going to say ‘Look at the Ducky, and the Bunny’”

There are different levels of perception and response in aesthetic experience, different backgrounds, capacities, and passions of engagement with respect to beauty. But the appeal of the beautiful in the lives of every human being and the constructive and transformative character of that appeal is undeniable. If, as Aristotle expressed it, love makes the world go round, then at least in the world of human beings, it is beauty that is the force of attraction of that movement.

Two basic intuitions led to the writing of this essay. The first is a sense that love and beauty have a necessary and reciprocal connection in the growth of the individual and culture such that as one develops a greater capacity for love so too does the perception and scope of beauty increase, and as the capacity for beauty expands, so too do the dimensions of love.

The second intuition is in the form of a correction, one that re-connects the cultural integrity of love, beauty, truth, and wisdom. Modern philosophy typically struggles with the problem of the relation between the analytic categories of the beautiful and the good, and the further disconnection of these with the true. We seem to have independently divergent and conflicting standards for judging anything, and accordingly need to choose exclusive perspectives. Classical Greek culture modeled a different

perspective, insisting on the fundamental integrity of the true, the good, and the beautiful such that whatever is beautiful must be good, whatever good must be true.

Our interest in this essay will be an investigation of beauty in the transformation of standards of value. This requires that we address not simply an aesthetics of beauty—the sensuous experience common to the judgment that something is beautiful—but a poetics of beauty, in the sense that beauty is not merely a passive reflection of experience, but an active bringing forth. Contemporary discussions of beauty in art, if the question is addressed at all (artists understandably wearied at the insistence that art be “beautiful” in traditional or accepted standards of the time) tend as do other such questions, to be technical discussions of style or production. My approach will be to return to a simpler notion of beauty, away from *techne* and technique, to *Sophia* and wisdom—to the way in which beauty is transformative in the life of a person or culture.

The standard or generative text on beauty in the philosophical tradition is Plato’s *Symposium*. A dialogue of encomiums to love, its design is to track the transformations of the soul in the pursuit of the beautiful. At dramatic and discursive length, the dialogue among the participants moves toward an ultimate stage of understanding in which the soul gives birth in beauty to what is good. Beauty, on Plato’s view, is the focus of the valuational transformations of a journey toward wisdom. The erotic linking of beauty and wisdom at the highest reach of human activity is to give birth—not simply as in the case of arts, to beautiful objects and thoughts—but to give birth in beauty to the good that is within each soul. The genuinely good life requires continuously creative acts through love and wisdom, but the life is good only if it is brought forth in beauty. There is a expression at the heart of Navajo culture that fits the case I want to argue: to walk in beauty.

The classical conception of philosophy as the love of wisdom is sometimes re-described in the canon of modern philosophy in ways that discounts the essential and generative force of love. So reconfigured, philosophy becomes not the love of wisdom, but the logic of knowledge. In classical Greek thought, love, as desire and the root of motion, was first identified as a lack or absence to account for human aspiration to wisdom. That love is essential is recognized by Plato in the central dialogue of the *Symposium*; the focus of development toward wisdom is accounted for not in terms of

*Logos* and knowledge, but of *Eros* and beauty. Wisdom in its cultural embodiment must arguably include all these essential elements, but Plato clearly has in mind a convergence of Beauty and Truth, in the Wisdom that achieves the *Eidos* of the Good. In effect, a life well lived—the life of wisdom and virtue—requires a love of the beauty of truth.

Depending on which dialogues seem central to one's particular interests, or what philosophical issue is being considering at the time, one may get a very different reading of the Platonic corpus. The greatest contrasting paradigms, both central to Plato, would seem to be the *λογος* of the *Republic* against or in tenuous alignment with the *ερος* of the *Symposium*. The question of whether it is reason or desire that is at the heart of philosophical inquiry is perhaps a moot question: both are obviously central to the defining conception of “the love of wisdom”. Whatever the core of method that develops in the pursuit of wisdom, however, there *is* no pursuit without a sustaining desire, and that generative idea is the presenting question of the *Symposium*. The interest of this essay is in the development of desire in beauty, and we will attempt to clarify the connection between love of the beautiful and love of the good—love inspired by beauty in relation to the love of the good in life. In this way we track a convergence of the aesthetic and the ethical in individual life and human culture celebrated in art.

The original intuition of common sense in ordinary discourse that has served philosophy since Socrates on both sides of the issue *pro* and *contra* is that the perception of ‘good’ is a rational judgment, a product of measured reflection. On the other hand the perception of beauty, as commonly considered, is the result of an emotional reflex more than a reflective or mediated response. Similarly, while the good is a determination with regard to something within, beauty at first blush is a response to something without.

The love of the good seemingly requires reflective study and cultural effort, whereas the love of the beautiful seems natural and automatic. But if so, and for that reason the latter, the love of the beautiful, is arguably prior in an order of philosophical concern. Hence the present focus on the *Symposium*.

The range of discussion of beauty in Plato's many dialogues would require an extensive inquiry in its own right and will not concern us here. It is enough to say that there is an uneven if not ambivalent comportment in the dialogues toward beauty; but the whole of his effort is clearly committed to extract the essence of beauty from the sensual faculties and the physical world, from the vulgar and carnal senses by effecting an ascendance through higher forms of love in the appropriation of Beauty itself into the soul.

Nietzsche complains that the Socratic demand, which Plato made his own, is that nothing can be beautiful or good unless it is rational, or rather an insistence that to be beautiful a thing must be good as judged by reason. But even if this is a final position that proves problematic, it obscures the more complex process of development that Plato provides in which beauty—the immediate occasion or quality which accounts for the human being's response to the world of sense—generates a deeper form of attraction that leads the soul, on reflection, to what is genuinely good in life. Keats' lyrical affirmation in the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, that Truth is Beauty, Beauty Truth is a romantic trope distanced from philosophical consideration, but there is in classical Greek thought a steady conviction that there exists an integral relation among the fundamental values of the true, the good and the beautiful. Each requires a convergence of the others: nothing can be good that is not true, nothing beautiful that is not good. There is also a deep and

connected belief that the ascendance to this higher and deeper perception into the heart of what is essential to human wellbeing is love. Aside from the metaphysics that attends

Plato's analysis, consider the following familiar passage from the *Symposium*:

But what if man had eyes to see beauty...pure and clear and unalloyed...and so, holding converse with true beauty simple and divine, to have hold of a reality, bringing forth and nourishing true virtue...These thing did Diotima say to me...that regarding the attainment of this end, human nature will not find a better helper than love. --*Symposium* 211e

The concluding sense of the dialectical encomiums in the *Symposium* is that *Eros*, *Love*, leading to a converse with true *Beauty*, has hold of a *reality* that nourishes the truly *Good*. It would be hard to find a more complete philosophical statement of the connection that we are analyzing between the concepts and deeper reality of love, beauty, and goodness: the convergence of the good and the beautiful is effected by *Eros*. And so beauty, that to which desire and attraction responds, is at the root of the good and so at the heart of human culture and to whatever is higher in human aspiration.

There are four basic distinctions within classical Greek literature that delineate the phenomenon of love, to which we will try to articulate commensurate levels and kinds of beauty.

1. *Libidos* is the primal energy of the living organism, the driving force of life itself; a primal manifestation of a lust for existence.
2. *Eros* is desire for, and evoked by the other, the primary attractive force in human motivation, usually identified with romantic love. Plato, however, in the *Symposium* uses this concept as the most general and inclusive form at every level of human motion and attraction.

3. *Philein* is a measured and thoughtful response of attraction; considered and considerate, it establishes a stable reciprocity of attraction, usually identified with friendship.
4. *Agape* is a form of “selfless” love, of devotion which does not does not respond to the imperative of survival, demand requital, or consolidate social relationships.

The highest development of love, *Agape* is transcendent and reconciling.

These common and traditional forms of expression of love can be drawn out in various ways in terms of kinds, levels and intensity. The object of love at the level of *Libidos* is the driving imperative of life itself--in the absence of *libido* there *is* no life. It is then not surprising to find that life-energy, motion, and love are in this way linked as essential to all existence, including human existence. At the level of the organism, the most elemental manifestation of love tied to the imperative of survival, *Libidos* brooks no obstacle of consequence that would moderate its force. It does not make sense to speak even in pejorative terms of self-love at this level because there is no “self” to be satisfied, nothing of motion or motive in the imperative of survival that requires the *human* locution of “self.” At this level of description an organism is driven by the desire for life, and love; “*Libidos*” is simply an expression of its own energy. To the degree to which an organism as a living creature initially engages the other, it is in terms of a will to prevail over whatever would restrict or suppress such expression.

If we regard these four different kinds of love in terms of human development, which is our interest here, the second stage toward fulfillment is *Eros*, understood in terms of attraction rather than compulsion, in which force is displaced by choice. This distinction is partly a matter of perspective, but it also represents a conceptual shift from

a natural organism manifesting life energy to a human being responding in specific ways to another human being, and in so doing manifesting in itself a sense of lack, and so a sense of the autonomous Other, and in the process gaining an identifying sense of self. The chief philosophical interest in an analysis of this level of life, as in the *Symposium*, is precisely that the process and problems of desire generate a preliminary if tenuous sense of humanity, in contrast to the way that the process and problems of libidinal desire generate only an awareness of existence.

It may be that the “lack” implicit in the movement of erotic attraction is not necessarily experienced as that without disaffections of failure or success, but it provides the basis, on reflection, for an awareness both of the limits of self in terms of needs and capacities for satisfying them, but also a basis for discernment of wants, of aspiration and fulfillment. It is likely for this reason that Plato makes Eros the comprehensive category of the *Symposium* in the encomiums to love that trace its kinds, levels, objects and effects through the various dimension of human desire and development. For Plato this movement is from the sensual world of body to the transcendental world of soul, but we can, I think, make out this difference in domains without adopting his idealist duplication of worlds. Every level of response and every speech in the *Symposium* is understandable as a distinctly human—that is erotic—response, and each level has already a capacity for development beyond the libidinal imperative of survival and so figures in the higher development of human culture.

In a broad reading of the Platonic corpus, *Eros*, in the *Symposium* functions in contrast to *Logos* in a creative and balancing tension that accounts for human life and culture. So considered they provide a parallel metaphor to Nietzsche’s categories of the



*Dionysian* and *Apollonian*, though clearly betraying a very different cultural bias. Plato's analysis of culture centers within the intellectual structure of a formal polity typical of the classical Greek age, in contrast to Nietzsche's grounding of culture in the whole of nature. Plato's rejection of the paradigm of the structure of the *polis* in favor of a republic retained the conviction that human life, both individual and cultural, requires the context of fully human community—the root meaning of *polis*. Nietzsche's consequent critique of classical Greek culture placed the vitality of cultural development in the emergent and dynamic context of a changing *nature*. Arguably, in contrast to *Eros* as the desire of attraction in Plato's account, Nietzsche's concept of the life force, of the *will to power*, founds human culture in terms not of desire and attraction where beauty is crucial, but in terms of *libidos*—a driving force that seeks to prevail, to overcome the restrictions of any stable development of human community.

The times are different of course. Socrates, insisting that the unexamined life was not worth living, was concerned that human beings lost their lives for thinking too little about them; hence “Know thyself” remained the central touchstone of higher culture. In the emergent culture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century into our own time there has been a decided remove from the classical project of *sophrosyne*, practical wisdom, and a loss of confidence in the enlightenment values of universal reason. A persistent existential strain of the modern temper suggests, on the contrary, that human beings may lose their lives for thinking too much, not too little about them. A corollary, though too faintly felt to be an effective deterrent, is that the erotic beauty of the spiritual is depleted by the rational economics of utility. Nietzsche's romantic and naturalistic rant against the leveling of what he called Alexandrian culture and the effects of a spiritless social order is not

without a kind of classical precedent. In Plato's balancing of *Eros* with *Logos*, and in the complementarity of the *Republic* and the *Symposium*, he is plainly aware that the spiritual health of culture is an erotic as well as a logistical project, and integral to that project is beauty.

In any event, although the emphasis changes in the evolution of culture and intellectual history in accounting for the split of mind/body, self/other, reason/desire, etc. the four Greek categories of love are still intact and useful, and beyond the libidinal and beginning with the erotic are singular to the development of human culture in their relation to beauty.

*Philein* constitutes a further development from the self-satisfying immediacy of desire of the erotic; it is a dimension of life that can be and is moderated—as filial or fraternal love, friendship. At this level of attraction there is a clear awareness of the reciprocity of human need in the other. Reciprocity may occur earlier, with or without recognition at the erotic level, in that what one desires in a sexual or romantic engagement is precisely the desire of the other, however such awareness is not essential to erotic attraction, where the beauty of intensity in the feeling is central. *Philein*, friendship, discovers beauty in a mediated and shared relationship, a stage apart in beauty from cathection of an object as a source of immediate gratification that generates a nascent sense of social integration of the good and the beautiful. In every case and in whatever form, love is an activity in response to a lack, but in the case of *Philein*, it is perceived as mutual, an implicit acknowledgment that life can be fulfilled only through and within a community of others. If erotic love is a desire for the desire of the other, the success of which ensures a sense of intimacy, *Philein* is a desire for the mutual well being

of the other which ensures a generative sense of community. It is a love built on recognition of myself in the other that fosters a reciprocity of care and concern. The beauty found here is not in the immediacy of feeling, or in the transformation of self in desire, but the enhanced beauty of social acknowledgment

*Agape*, the final development of the form of desire, in whatever its variations of secular or sacred expression, expands the scope of desire and so the scope of beauty, and carries with it the idea of transcendence. Perhaps the broadest reading of this form of desire is that of reconciliation with, and celebration of the whole of existence. If the initial movement of love as *Libido* is the internal drive of the organism to overcome the other, the evolution of desire develops in *Eros* for the other, through *Philein* as care and concern for the other, then the cultural development of human beings comes full circle in a comprehensive love in *Agape*, paradoxically, that is selfless. In this last stage of development, beauty is discovered in both transcendence of the isolated self, and of the mutual isolation of self and others as a form of life. The beauty of appeal in *Agape* is reconciliation with the wholeness and unity of life. The individual in such a condition of love becomes, in love, one with the whole of existence. Thus the direction of desire and the compass of beauty tends always toward completing the cycle and circle of initiation, separation, and reconciliation.

As an organism, a creature must contend with and overcome all else; developmentally transformed by love, this conflicted individuation is overcome and life itself at the level of *Agape* is reconciled in beauty so renewed. The familiar journey of desire in Plato is an ascendance to a synoptic vision and the form of the good, in which one apprehends beauty as it is in itself, that is, no longer individuated in particular things

or people. In a less metaphysically encumbered expression, the phenomenal world appears as, and in terms Keats poetic conflation, is made whole in love, in truth, and in beauty. In a different, religious context—for example in Christianity—this ascendance is from love of world to love of God; but in either case the accomplishment is the fulfillment of the soul, understood as the highest cultural achievement of the human being. Even in Nietzsche’s deliberately profane account where love is more a manifestation of will than desire, there is this same spiritual ascendance, an overcoming of both the individual and commonplace in a restoration of cultural life.

In all three of these variances, the manifestation of desire in response to beauty involves transcendence as well as ascendance. Although “selfless” means something quite different in the work of Plato, Christianity, or Nietzsche, the life of the individual is a cultural development, a cycle of completion from a libidinal creature (whether an organism whose origin is the sea or whose home prior to a fatal Fall was Eden) in which the initial imperative of love is the beauty of life itself. The perspective I am suggesting here is that individuated life, through a cycle of developmental desire, is restored through desire to a beauty creatively commensurate with the evolution of Being itself. This is technical and regrettably obtuse: a better way to express the point may be that the development of human life—that is human being within cultural life—can be recognized in the ascendant cycles of desire and transcending stages, through the sequences of organism, human creature, individuated person, individuated community, to a final reconciliation of human being with the principle and source of life itself. The life and emergent culture of human beings are generated and transformed through desire toward more and more inclusive forms of beauty. Beauty, which begins as an immediate appeal

of perception that separates self from other, becomes an ultimate focus and form of reflection, reconciliation, and celebration.

Once we have moved beyond the simple, primal imperative of survival built into the living organism—*Libidos*—movement is accounted for differently in degree, and arguably in kind. No longer a driving force within, love becomes an attractive force without that accounts for movements of heart and forms of mind. It is at this generative stage that Plato began his account of the requisite journey of human aspiration in philosophy, in Diotima's relating to Socrates the story of the demi-god *Eros*, son of *Penia* and *Poros*—a creature born of poverty and plenty, a creature caught-between, always longing for something higher. It is hardly surprising that this description of *Eros* is not unlike the picture of we have of ourselves as human beings, creatures defined by a culture that is the beneficiary of the spiritual force of this lesser god.

We can match-up the objects of attraction to levels and kinds of beauty according to the development of love from *Eros* to *Agape*. Freed from the imperative of life, love develops in response to beauty as we have seen, into a transcendent aesthetic that embraces the whole of existence. Although we have identified *Libidos* as a driving force in response to the imperative of life, it is clear that the first *erotic* attraction to beauty, for example in the *Symposium's* analysis in terms of judgment, is the attraction of the particular person or object. Plato, typical of the classical Greek sensibility, is interested only in development at this “higher” level of rational consciousness—that is independent of the cycles of natural necessity that bind the lower forms of libidinal life. The concept of beauty on this view only arises at the level of *Eros*. We can, however, we can easily conceive of prior possibilities of the emergence of beauty. Consider, for example, in Eric

Erickson familiar psycho-social stages of development, the first focus of awareness in the infant's attachment to the mother's breast as a source of life and comfort. It is arguable that this context manifests an initial and intimate sense and source of beauty that develops and remains a focus of attraction in the history of art in sculpting and painting nudes no less than the populist hyping of the female body in contemporary culture. It is not only philosophy but life that begins in wonder, which carries beauty with it in the logic of its attraction. The whole of ensuing culture, from the first spark of desire, is a continuing development of a logic of wonder in beauty, the most eloquent expressions of which are found in creative modes of variance within religion, science, and art.

It is common in philosophy to begin an analysis of beauty at the point of judgment 'That is beautiful.' However, beauty seems appropriate to account for the quality in anything that attracts and delights even the child who as yet has no sense of propositional judgment. In this sense beauty may cover a broad range of qualities and levels of response, but in every case a property in or attributable to something that elicits or triggers desire—the response of *Eros*. Modern aesthetics has tended to analyze the aesthetic response to art as necessarily disinterested, wholly disengaged from erotic engagement. An aesthetic appreciation of the painting of a female nude, for example, must be such that there is no desire for the body in question, no prurience in the perception of a naked woman. But both Plato and Freud, for their different reasons, were closer to the heart of a continuing albeit transformed *Eros* in accounting for the extended passions of cultural life.

It would be useful to engage in more detailed analysis of the dimensions and variations of beauty, for example in perceptions of pretty, attractive, striking,

fascinating, singular, awesome, unique, etc. It is also clear that as generic concepts neither beauty nor love have definite boundaries. Love, as we have seen may be usefully distinguished in four distinct categories, prior even to more detailed differences among wants and needs. So too, beauty may be discovered in parallel categories that fit the level, kind, and intensity of attraction. In concert with Plato's analysis, the surface beauty and physical form of youth may be considered within several variations of carnal or sexual attraction; the appeal of friendship further develops in response to a different level and kind of beauty, in the attraction of sharing—not simply of taking but of giving. We can also attribute, with thanks to Plato, parallels in ascendance of love and beauty from a response to particular things to more general and inclusive experiences, from physical and surface attraction to the deeper spiritual attraction to which the soul—that is the whole and fully human person—responds, so that at a consummate level of *Agape* the whole of existence becomes an experience of beauty.

From the perspective of the creative arts, desire manifests itself at every level of expression. One may choose to judge levels of expression in terms of development out of primitive expressions of sheer energy in the striving for existence (*Libidos*), or, in negative terms, in the desperate gestures of those losing a sense of existence, for example in the graffiti on the tenement walls of the inner city. The judgment of what is art, much less what is good art, always remains tenuous. We are inclined however, and rightly I think, to reserve the expression of beauty in art to some clear form of affirmation, some celebration of life beyond that of contingent survival. But whatever forms art may take beyond 'erotic' expression, that primitive core of desire remains an essential part of the expression and attraction—the beauty—of the work, however refined or abstract its form.

Whether in a flat surface of monochromatic paint on a canvass, or the surface features of a sculpted shape, if we are moved by its expression as art we are drawn into the interior life of the piece, into an interior life of desire in ourselves, and into the cultural fabric of a shared history. The fact that beauty is transformative through desire is the creative appeal of art, as well as a reason for its continued existence.

Having said all this about the appeal and imperative of beauty and desire in art and life, I will end on less than a positive note about contemporary life and culture: When beauty becomes incidental to the cultural life of a people, when art becomes at best an afterthought or addendum of leisure, when it becomes a mere commodity of investment, a distraction from the tedium of existence, or worse, a medium for primal expressions of anger and hatred, then any hope of a higher culture, or a more vital human existence is at an end.

It is the love of beauty, simply, that creates and restores what is good in human life, and the gift and grace of the creative arts in giving us access to expressions of that love and to that beauty, are finally and integrally, an essential form of the good that we cannot do without.

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